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The Proper Stile of Chriſtian Oratory.

A
SERMON

PREACHED AT

HUNTINGDON,

JANUARY 7, 1770.

By PETER PECKARD, A. M.

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Simplicity and Sincerity are of ſo amiable a Nature, that they cannot fail to recommend us to the Favour both of God and Man. ——— *a Chriſtian Divine muſt be cautious of inclining to thoſe who, deluded by the Vapours of an over-heated Imagination, rant and rave* —— *if puffed up with Vanity, and greedy of popular Applauſe, I have beguiled you with the enticing Words of Man's Wiſdom* —— *miſerable Wretch that I am, who ſhall deliver me from the Wrath to come?* Mr. Scot's Farew: Ser: at Leeds.

HUNTINGDON:
Printed by J. JENKINSON; and ſold by T. PAYNE at
the Mews Gate, and L. DAVIS in Holborn, *London.*

MDCCLXX.

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BRITISH MUSEUM

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MDCCLXX.

TO THE INHABITANTS OF HUNTINGDON.

GENTLEMEN,

THE following diſcourſe preached in your Church, and now printed in compliance with the deſire of a reſpectable part of the audience, I humbly offer to your conſideration. It contains nothing more than a few general hints, and as it were a ſummary view of ſome, out of many weighty, arguments that might be urged in defence of the Doctrine here maintained. The ſubject itſelf is of great importance; to treat it properly would require a volume; and therefore it could be but very imperfectly touched in a diſcourſe of this nature.

THE general practice of the method here condemn'd, which ſeems to be coming every day more and more into faſhion, and which I think liable to very ſerious objections, will I hope excuſe me to thoſe who perhaps may judge this ſubject to be fitter for Critical examination, than for the Pulpit. But as the latter is the place where the offence is committed, it may not be an improper place for that offence to be corrected. In general indeed the declamatory, and theatrical ſtile of preaching is followed by thoſe of very mean abilities, and with the meaneſt views. Sometimes it proceeds from abſolute ignorance heated by a great degree of enthuſiaſm. And in both theſe inſtances the nonſenſical ravings of theſe brawling Declaimers muſt be nauſeated by every one of true taſte and judgment. But the multitude in general miſtaking Sound for Senſe, and Action for Argument, follow tumultuouſly theſe vain bablers. And while they

——— their lean and flaſhy ſongs
Grate on their ſcrannel pipes of wretched ſtraw,
The hungry ſheep look up, and are not fed,
But ſwoln with wind, and the rank miſt they draw
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion ſpread. —

MILTON — *Lycidas.*

But

But the misfortune does not end here. The love of fame and popular applauſe is a weakneſs that is ſometimes found to our grief where we muſt ſincerely wiſh it's abſence; it is the infirmity of noble minds, and men valuable for learning and real ingenuity, ſeduced and infatuated by this frailty, do ſometimes ſtoop beneath themſelves, and condeſcend to this proſtitution of their abilities.

Then indeed the worſt events may be dreaded. For we know from undoubted hiſtory that the moſt terrible calamities, both public and private, have been the conſequence of this application of Oratory to Religion. For when men are led in this inſtance by their paſſions beyond their reaſon, there is no ſaying whither they will go. What was the immediate cauſe of thoſe devaſtations committed by the Anabaptiſts upon the continent of Europe, but the madneſs of enthuſiaſm raiſed to this pitch by the Oratory of their Teachers? Did not the ſame cauſe in the laſt century operate very powerfully in both parts of this kingdom, and help to inflame the multitude to ſuch a degree of fury as ended in the deſtruction of the Conſtitution?

tution? What is it even to this day amongſt ſome of our Sectaries but the infatuating Oratory of their Teachers, which meeting with a gloomy turn of conſtitutional melancholy has tempted many to deſpair of the Grace of God, and violently to put an end to their own Lives? What has been all along, and to the preſent time continues to be the Stile of Preaching amongſt the Papiſts, but a turgid and boiſterous Oratory, by which they can inflame the paſſions of their Hearers, or perhaps give them a Theatrical entertainment, and either way carry them off from every cool and rational conſideration? Let it alſo be remembred that the exellence of Oratory has always preceeded the Ruin of that State where it has been found moſt excellent. Can I produce a ſtronger example than from the commonwealths of Greece and Rome? Oh! may it never be found excellent in Britain? Oh! may it never find encouragement from Chriſtian Preachers!

Moved by theſe conſiderations I have put together a few thoughts on this important ſubject in a general way; myſelf not making or intending any invidious application, but on the contrary deſiring that no ſuch ap-

application may be made by any other perſon. They who think differently on this ſubject have doubtleſs a full right to their own opinion, and I who diſſent from them have a right to mine. But nevertheleſs there is a common principle of union between us as Chriſtians, and I hope it will appear that there may be this difference of opinion without any diminution of Eſteem, or breach of Chriſtian Charity. With ſincereſt wiſhes both for your temporal and eternal welfare I remain,

GENTLEMEN,

Your obliged

and moſt obedient

humble ſervant,

P. PECKARD.

* * *

1 COR. i. 21.

It pleaſed God by the fooliſhneſs of preaching to ſave them that believe.

IT muſt appear at firſt ſight that the word *Fooliſhneſs* in this text is not to be underſtood in its direct and literal ſenſe. For real *Folly*, as ſuch, cannot even in human proceedings be a proper mean either to convey uſefull inſtruction, or produce any effect beneficial to mankind. Much leſs can it be aſſiſtant to Almighty God, or be thought a proper method to eſtabliſh his benevolent purpoſe in the ſalvation of the human race.

We muſt therefore go a little farther than the meer literal ſenſe for the true meaning of this expreſſion: we muſt ſee what it ariſes from, and is oppoſed to; and muſt examine it in its comparative ſignification.

The Goſpel of Jeſus Chriſt was the appointed method of ſalvation to the human race. Before this diſpenſation of *Univerſal*

Grace,

Grace, there was a diſtinction made in God's Covenants with reſpect to Religious priviledges. And by this diſtinction the world was divided into Jew and Gentile; or as it is ſometimes expreſſed into Jew and Greek: an appellation of leſs extent being uſed in a more general ſignification: inſomuch that we frequently find the word Gentile, or Heathen, or Greek to imply a perſon not belonging to the Jewiſh peculiarity.

But the Chriſtian inſtitution was deſigned to put an end to this diſtinction. By this the whole world, Jew, and Greek, were equally invited, and were equally admitted to the terms of acceptance with God, and to eternal ſalvation. And yet St. Paul informs us that this gracious diſpenſation became to the Jews a ſtumbling block, and to the Greeks *Fooliſhneſs*. Nevertheleſs he alſo tells us in the text, that it pleaſed God by this *Fooliſhneſs* of preaching to ſave them that believe.

The fooliſhneſs of Goſpel preaching then was not that which was really ſo in itſelf, but that which was eſteemed to be ſo by the ſelf-conceited Greeks. The reaſon of their falſe judgment in this reſpect will evidently appear, if we conſider the circumſtances and faſhion of public inſtruction prevalent amongſt that people, and compare it with the nature of Religious inſtruction eſtabliſhed by the Goſpel. —— This will lead us to a conſideration both of the *Matter* and the *Manner* of public inſtruction received and followed reſpectively in theſe oppoſite Syſtems.

In general the Greeks had accuſtomed themſelves to ſpeculations and enquiries of a very abſtruſe and difficult nature. This divided them, as may be eaſily imagined, into a great variety of Sects, who maintained not only different but contradictory opinions. Hence different Schools of public inſtruction were inſtituted in oppoſition to each other, and in each of theſe the characters of their reſpective teachers were to be ſupported. In theſe efforts nothing was ſuppoſed to give the air and character of Wiſdom ſo much as the being able to advance, and plauſibly maintain any new and difficult doctrine. Inſomuch that the degree of wiſdom ſeemed to be meaſured, as it were, by an inverted rule; being eſtimated not in proportion as men underſtood it, but as they did not underſtand it, and were unable to comprehend it.

And this was a deluſion that was eaſily conducted by their ſkill in Oratory. In which art they were ſo well practiſed, that ingenious men could in a ſurprizing manner ſo lead and miſlead their hearers, could, like ſkilfull fencers in reaſoning, object and reply to every objection with ſuch equal plauſibility, could raiſe ſuch artificial difficulties and inſtantly reſolve them by ſuch artificial anſwers, that the amazed audience were loſt in a Rhetorical wilderneſs, and were confounded in their underſtandings as to all proper diſtinction between Vice and Virtue, which were ſo artificially blended together, and their dreſs and deſcription ſo aſſimilated and interchanged, that there was no poſſibility of diſtinguiſhing the one from the other. — Add to this, that all their public diſcourſes were ornamented to the higheſt degree. Earth and Heaven was ranſack'd for figures, and alluſions to pleaſe the fancy, and fire the imagination. They had an elegant and finiſh'd language to work with: Oratory and Eloquence joined their forces; and theſe were ſet before the People in all the charms of a poliſh'd ſtile, and with all the force of Theatrical geſture.

Mean-while the paſſions of the multitude were inflamed they knew not why: the magick of Oratory had begun its work, and by its powerful infatuation they were lead whitherſoever the ſpeaker pleaſed to lead them. So that many a notable enterprize has been atchieved by a good Speech, for which it would have been difficult to have given a good reaſon.

It is indeed the province of Oratory not to inform the judgment, but inflame the Paſſions: and the conſequence of it is, not the ſober temperature of rational inſtruction, but the falſe fire of a deluded imagination. Yet this was accounted wiſdom of ſpeech amongſt the Greeks, and he who in this reſpect could act his part the moſt effectually, was reckoned the greateſt man, and commanded every where the popular admiration.

But theſe are all diſhonourable arts; the tricks of common harlotry; fitted more to conceal or diſguiſe defects, than to give any ornament to real beauty.

On the contrary the genuine character of Chriſtianity, both as to the matter it contains, and the manner in which it ought to

be

be delivered, is a noble plainneſs, and a maſterly contempt of all affectation For the purity of Evangelical truth cannot be ſo advantageouſly repreſented as in its own peculiar and genuine ſimplicity. But this plain, and unornamented manner was unknown to the Greeks, and unfelt by them; it was reputed barbarous; it was received with contempt. The pomp of words and external flouriſh was held in the higheſt eſtimation. No wonder therefore that the doctrines of the Goſpel, diveſted of this falſe glare which they thought wiſdom, and thus unſuited to their vitiated taſte, ſhould appear to them as *Fooliſhneſs.*

But with reſpect to this particular, St. Paul expreſsly tells the Corinthians that he came to them not with the *Excellency of Speech* or wiſdom, declaring the teſtimony of God, and that his preaching was not with *enticing words of man's wiſdom,* but in demonſtration of the Spirit. And his reaſon for it was that *their faith might not ſtand in the wiſdom of men, but in the power of God.* He warns the the Coloſſians alſo to *take care leſt any man beguile them with enticing words.*

Now to any one, who is in the leaſt degree

gree converſant in St. Paul's writings, it muſt plainly appear that this was not from a want of ability to play the part of an Orator, but was a matter of deliberate choice. For he in many places unawares, and as it were in ſpite of himſelf, diſplays ſuch a wonderful fertility of imagination, ſuch a glowing fervency of thought, ſuch bold tranſitions, ſuch a rapturous elevation of ſentiment, with an addreſs ſo polite and inſinuating, that had the praiſe of Oratory, or popular admiration been his point in view, I know not, even amongſt the Greeks themſelves, who could have attained a higher degree of reputation.

Yet he ſought not what he might ſo eaſily have gained, popular applauſe; he was anxious only for the approbation of God. He thought the mean artifices of man's wiſdom were beneath the dignity of his high office, who was appointed to preach Chriſt crucified, and Eternal ſalvation by his death. Theſe truths plainly reveal'd, he plainly deliver'd. But this noble ſimplicity, tho' in fact the true criterion of ſublimity, was rejected by them for the frothy effuſions of Oratorical vanity.

When therefore St. Paul thus plainly preach-

preached the plain truths of the Goſpel, deſpiſing the enticing words of man's wiſdom, and all the vain tricks of oſtentatious affectation; when he not only delivered doctrines contrary to their received opinions, but theſe too in the utmoſt ſimplicity of ſpeech, entirely unadorn'd with the gay dreſs and deluſive flowers of Oratory, we muſt not be ſurprized that certain Philoſophers ſhould encounter him in theſe contemptuous terms, What will this babler ſay?

St. Paul notwithſtanding, perſiſts repeatedly to warn his diſciples to beware leſt any man ſpoil them *thro' vain deceit, and enticing words*, and thro' that *excellency of Speech*, which tho' it may pleaſe the imagination or inflame the paſſions, will neither improve the heart nor inform the underſtanding. He therefore followed the method deſpiſed by the Greeks, and adher'd religiouſly to that *Fooliſhneſs* of preaching, by which it pleaſed God to ſave them that believe.

The eternal ſalvation of man, is a point of too ſerious a nature to be trifled with by Orators, and of too high importance to be truſted to the tranſient ſallies of an inflamed imagination. And with reſpect to thoſe perſons who require amuſement in their religious duties, and ſeek for entertainment in a Church, as in a Theatre, in my opinion they greatly miſtake the nature both of their own duty and the preacher's office; which I ſhould think go no farther than a ſerious attention to diſpaſſionate inſtruction.

Yet let me not be miſapprehended. I mean not to condemn, but on the contrary to recommend a proper fervency on both parts. Earneſt, but rational. And tho' I would not deck out Religion like a Jezebel in a harlot's garb, with a tired head and painted face, and ſet her out to the public gaze and admiration; yet would it be a real grief to ſee her wrap'd in wretched rags, and laid like a beggar at the gate, full of ſores. The mean and miſerable poverty of dreſs on one hand, and on the other the gaudy inſincerity of decoration ought equally to be avoided. Neither the contemptible effuſions of ignorant, tho' enthuſiaſtic ſectariſts, nor yet the affected geſticulations of a ſtage mimic become the ſober dignity of our Religion. May ſhe ever be cloathed in that decent ſimplicity that beſt ſuits the majeſty of truth. To uſe the words of a prelate of our own church, "The ſtile, and the manner of religious inſtruction ſhould be ſimple, expreſſive, weighty, authoritative; and "therefore tho' not without ſome true art, "yet not very artificial; and rather void of "all ornament, than over-adorn'd; but as "much ſcriptural as may be without affectation, and as eaſy, familiar, and intelligible as poſſible" *.

This was the opinion of a very reſpectable preacher of God's word, which is founded in undoubted truth. For the religion of Jeſus Chriſt aims not in this reſpect at dominion over the paſſions, but would influence the conſcience of man by a temperate and rational conviction of his ſober judgment. And where ſo many engines of the world are conſtantly at work, and where ſo many human weakneſſes continually cooperate to draw aſide the heart and affections, this will be found no very eaſy office. But on the contrary, believe me, it is not a difficult thing to paint religion in the falſe colours of Oratory. It is no hard taſk to invent ſtriking images, and to dwell upon deſcription. There is neither labour, nor

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* Bp. of Roch: Diſc: to his Clergy — 1695.

ingenuity, in pointing to *the Heavens above*, or to *the Earth beneath*, nor in ſpreading forth the hands, *as he that ſwimmeth ſpreadeth forth his hands to ſwim*. All this is merely *acting a part*; and a little practice with ſome effrontery would ſoon make any one maſter of theſe accompliſhments. But there is a fatal conſequence attendant upon this method, which juſtly ſubjects the uſe of it to reprehenſion. It leads men aſtray from true religion to follow the objects of a childiſh imagination. It is a ſpecies of idolatry, as it carries off the ſerious attention and true devotion of mind from the God of Heaven, who in our religious exerciſes ought to engage our entire attachment, to the deluſive tho' ſplendid accompliſhments of an artful Orator. It is marking out a different road to Heaven from that which is mark'd out by our Saviour: a road too, in its nature ſo precarious and uncertain, that we are in danger to loſe our way in it, and never come ſafe to our journey's end.

In confirmation of what has been ſaid, let it be remembred, that in thoſe remains of our Saviour's diſcourſes, which are preſerved in the Goſpel, we may obſerve an inimitable ſimplicity of ſtile and manner. No affectation of excellency of ſpeech, no application to the paſſions of the people. Yet is it juſtly obſerv'd of him, that *never man ſpake as he ſpake*, and that *he taught as one having Authority*. But this he did by opening the underſtanding and convincing the judgment, not by inflaming the paſſions or entertaining the fancy of his hearers.

Virtue wants not any falſe or artificial ornaments to recommend her: and Vice is ſufficiently horrible in her own native deformity. But there always is danger, that by every fictitious and poetical deſcription Virtue may be injured, without a likelihood of gaining any thing in return. And after all the moſt advantageous light in which ſhe can be plac'd, is that of ſtrict Truth.

It may be ſaid perhaps, that by the excellency of ſpeech and Theatrical geſture, ſtronger impreſſions being made, and the paſſions more engag'd, the hearers are raiſed to a higher pitch of ardour and admiration. Be it ſo. It is the very thing that ought to be avoided. For whoever builds his religion upon Enthuſiaſtic raptures, has got a foundation I am afraid, that will not ſupport his building.

Oratory is doubtleſs the ſhort road to popular admiration, but indeed it is not the road that leads to Salvation: it is deſtructive of that noble ſimplicity which is recommended to us by the higheſt authority, and is the reverſe of that *fooliſhneſs of preaching* by which it pleaſed God to ſave them that believe.

But this *fooliſhneſs of God is wiſer than men*; and after all God choſe the *fooliſh things to confound the wiſe.* He made choice of untutor'd and illiterate men, men intirely unacquainted with the fallacious arts of Oratory, to put to ſhame the eloquent philoſopher. Becauſe true religion ariſing not from any influence upon the imagination, but from the rational and ſober conviction of conſcience, ought not to be directed to the paſſions but to the underſtanding. For theſe reaſons a manly *ſimplicity, diſdaining the vanity of affectation*, is the true ſtile of Goſpel inſtruction; and for theſe reaſons did it pleaſe God by the *fooliſhneſs of preaching to ſave them that believe.*

FINIS.